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The Comeback

In a Silent Way, the Jazz Legend Has Resumed His Career Is His Heart Still in It? Yes!

by Steve Futterman

The favorite pastime of jazz fans during the late '70s was speculating on Miles Davis's return. Unheard from on record or in live performance since 1975, Davis was keeping his life a deliberate mystery, maintaining his privacy while flaming the sparks of rumor and hearsay. Each year a new, contradictory report popped up: Miles was mortally ill, Miles was rehearsing with V.S.O.P., Miles was a hopeless drug addict, Miles was busy working on an adaptation of Verdi's "Tosca," Miles was burnt out with nothing left to say...

We, the devoted, had our own romantic justifications for Davis's self-imposed silence. Davis, we figured, was just trying to escape the jazz life, retreating into a protective shell to avoid meeting the fate of a Charlie Parker or a Bud Powell. We also clung to the self-deluding notion that if anyone deserved the time off, it was Davis. After four decades of important work, helping to establish the '40s cool, '50s hard bop, '60s modal and '70s jazz-rock schools, Davis was entitled to a long rest. By 1981, though, after six years of nonactivity, it looked like we had heard all we were going to from jazz's eternal pioneer.

Davis's last release had been *Agharta*, a live album from a February 1975 concert in Japan. This confused and confusing work reflected the musical dead end that Davis was in just six years after his landmark LP *Bitches Brew*. Although Davis is rightfully credited with being the father of the ill-fated fusion movement, he was the only major artist who avoided many of its stylistic pitfalls. Others—including John McLaughlin, Chick Corea and Weather Report—who had made creative breakthroughs at the beginning, had quickly fallen into formulaic regurgitations and empty virtuosic ramblings. Davis, with the wisdom only a patriarch could possess, avoided this trap by striking out in a multitude of directions each time he recorded. It is still too early to assess most of this work; some is successful (*Jack Johnson*), some unlistenable (*In Concert*). But the jury is still undecided on the majority of the '70s recordings. While Davis refused to confine himself to one sound, it was, unfortunately, becoming difficult to follow his music at all. The sounds were so personal as to be indecipherable.

By *Agharta* something was clearly wrong. An ugly psychodrama whose metallic textures scrape your nerve endings, *Agharta* is aural pain, a prophesy of Davis's next six years of physical torment, drug-induced paranoia and torpidity. Miles's recurrent health problems with his hip and legs forced him off the road, and other demons soon caught up.

When asked in 1981 what he had been doing during that half decade, Davis's answer was inimitably direct: "Nothin', gettin' high." Saxophonist Bill Evans, who later joined the first of Davis's comeback bands, spent nearly every day of 1980 with the ailing trumpeter. He was a firsthand witness to Davis's indulgences.

"During the period when his health wasn't so good, Miles would go on binges," Evans recalls. "We'd go to some of the weirder parts of New York, and since I don't do any drugs, I'd keep him out of trouble. He knew that if he got totally out, I was around. If he fell on the floor, I was there to put him on his feet again. Having someone like me around kept a balance; if there were people around that he couldn't count on, he could always count on me. So when the music started to get together, [drummer] Al Foster and I helped him put together a band."

Health and drug problems aside, consider Davis's artistic courage at returning to the scene. During his "retirement" in the late '70s, jazz had changed significantly. Fusion had flamed itself out. A whole new breed of young musicians—David Murray, Anthony Davis, James Newton, among others—were rediscovering acoustic jazz or, like James Blood Ulmer, Ronald Shannon Jackson and Jamaaladeen



Photo by John Belissimo/Retna Ltd.

Tacuma, turning to Ornette Coleman and his open-ended "harmolodic" method of electric improvisation. Davis, who had once led the pack, found that the scene could prosper without him.

Though no one expected Davis to have devised a revolutionary approach to electric jazz while he had been away, we were all secretly hoping against hope that he might. And so the paucity of hard ideas on 1981's *The Man With the Horn* was that much more disappointing. We didn't know which was the bigger shock—his return or the album's lukewarm noodling. True, Miles was finally alive, well and clean, but his new music was slick secondhand funk and moldy jazz-rock clichés masquerading as "New Directions in Music," Davis's post-Brew trademark. Unsure where he now fit, Davis had retreated into safe, passé and reductive musical modes.

The one bright ray of hope was that the man with the horn sounded just fine. This may not have been Davis's most transcendent playing, but he hadn't lost the *sound*, that gorgeous peal of heartbreak and triumph. All we had to do was wait until he ironed out the kinks in his ill-conceived band.

A disturbing incompleteness and uncertainty marked the live appearances that followed. Davis might blow some cogent but all too brief solos and then give his sidemen unreserved freedom to cut loose as they chose. The absence of leadership crippled the music. A man of few words, Davis seemed to be saying fewer than ever to his band.

"He got you because he wanted you to play like you did," Bill Evans says. "He really wouldn't give you suggestions about playing; he let you do what you wanted. He put the thing together and you went up and played, and most of the time off stage you wouldn't talk about music."

This might have produced some inspired blowing when Miles was working with John Coltrane or Sonny Rollins, but Evans, then a promising but still unformed soloist, and guitarist Mike Stern, didn't always merit the space and attention. But this was all deliberate. By featuring his sidemen, Miles was easing the pressure on himself. The 1981-82 band was a musical self-help program for Davis, where he could rebuild his chops and ego. Surrounded by competent, enthusiastic but never outstanding musicians, Davis kept the spotlight on himself even when he wasn't playing. When he did blow, it was in a comfortably unchallenging environment. A live album from the tour, *We Want Miles*, reconfirmed that Davis had not found an identity for the band.

Nineteen eighty-three brought fresh hope with the release of *Star People*. Miles's health was considerably improved and his marriage to actress Cicely Tyson gave him renewed interest in controlling the music again. This time, rather than letting the funk lead him, Davis started to impose his personality on it. First there had to be some changes.

Stern left the band, and John Scofield, a seasoned guitarist with a solid background in both fusion and bop bands, came in. Davis was ready to challenge himself again, and Scofield is just the sort of player who can breathe down his neck.

"Miles is like Duke Ellington in that way," he claims. "He uses players as individuals to get what he can from them. That way the music always changes as new members come in."

Davis also began relying more on Gil Evans, the brilliant arranger he has worked with since the late '40s. Evans, who Scofield says acts as Davis's "sounding board" at every session, transcribed and adapted individual solos that Davis had chosen for unison guitar and sax passages. These riffy interludes add density and melodic interest whenever the funk starts to settle down.

Star People also saw the advent of synthesizers to the band, a sure

sign Davis was coping with the '80s. As handled by Miles, the results were both graceful and funky, or as he so modestly puts it, "Nobody else can play keyboard like that." Often doubling his horn lines on the synth, Davis approaches the instrument orchestrally, adding richness to the ensemble but never weighing it down.

The best news was Davis's trumpet playing, especially on the title track and "It Gets Better," two slow blues numbers that are the album's centerpieces. In returning to the very source of jazz, rock and funk, Davis replenished his creativity and began to expand his musical horizons. As it has for 40 years, the blues connects Davis with musical and cultural roots that are divine sources of inspiration. As Scofield says, "The slow blues are a part of Miles. It's a standard form, but nobody plays it like him."

Last year's stage work was also of high quality. In marked contrast to two years before, Davis was now visually exuberant and blowing up a storm. With Scofield goading him on with speedy runs, Miles dug in for some impassioned horn statements. Standing—make that crouching—center stage, the bell of his trumpet pointed toward the floor, Davis concentrated all the energy from the room onto himself and then divvied it out note by note in succinct and stunning proportions. Bill Evans, who recently left Davis ("You can't be Mr. Sideman forever") and was replaced by Bob Berg, recalls these performances. "He would have an interaction with the audience where he could pull them into whatever he was doing with just a few notes. It was his awareness of the whole picture that let him stay very much in control of the situation."

Miles's own confidence in the group must have also increased, for he began talking openly about what he wanted. "Miles is very communicative; he says exactly what's on his mind," Scofield reports. "He likes to talk about the music."

Davis's new LP, *Decoy*, is the long-awaited payoff. Produced by Davis, not by Teo Macero, the boardman who has midwived Miles's albums since the late '50s, *Decoy* captures the right blend of jazz

improvisation, funk rhythms, rock fervor and blues shadings.

The contributions of Davis's sidemen are now major factors in the music's quality. Paradoxically, in relinquishing control, Davis can stamp his signature on the music. Band-members' contributions of compositions and arrangements provide Miles with fresh input that he then molds to his own vision. Yet despite the source, the endproduct is somehow pure Miles. The 1984 edition—Davis, Scofield, Foster, Berg, bassist Darryl Jones, keyboardist Robert Irving III and percussionist Mino Cinelu, now with Weather Report—is based on these healthy cooperative intentions. On the entire second side of *Decoy*, Davis shares writing credits with Scofield; on side one Irving wrote or cowrote three out of four tracks. Davis's first keyboardist since 1972, Irving handles only synthesizers on *Decoy* and is largely responsible for the album's thoroughly contemporary sound.

The remarkable achievement of *Decoy* is that while it is clearly of the '80s, it never sounds derivative or commercial. Its funk has no relation to the mechanized rhythms of Herbie Hancock's "Rockit," its rock undertones transcend the bombastic vestiges of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. It is the music of Miles Davis, 1984 style. Because of this, its greater influence seems small; the music achieves its power only through its individual contributors and their inimitable leadership.

What's next for Davis? The clues he leaves are as tantalizing, and puzzling, as ever. He publically states that his favorite listening fare is Michael Jackson, Missing Persons, D Train and Earth, Wind and Fire. John Scofield says that Davis has been toying with the idea of another Big Band collaboration with Gil Evans. Their proposed material: songs popularized by Kenny Loggins, Dionne Warwick and DeBarge. Davis is planning on producing a video for *Decoy*; he plays Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time" in concert. Who knows, we may see Davis on MTV yet.

Whatever directions Davis does take, *Decoy* proves that he has it in him to pull them off. With Scofield, Irving and an increasingly adept rhythm section stoking the engine, the Miles Davis band is once again the toughest electric jazz unit in the world. □

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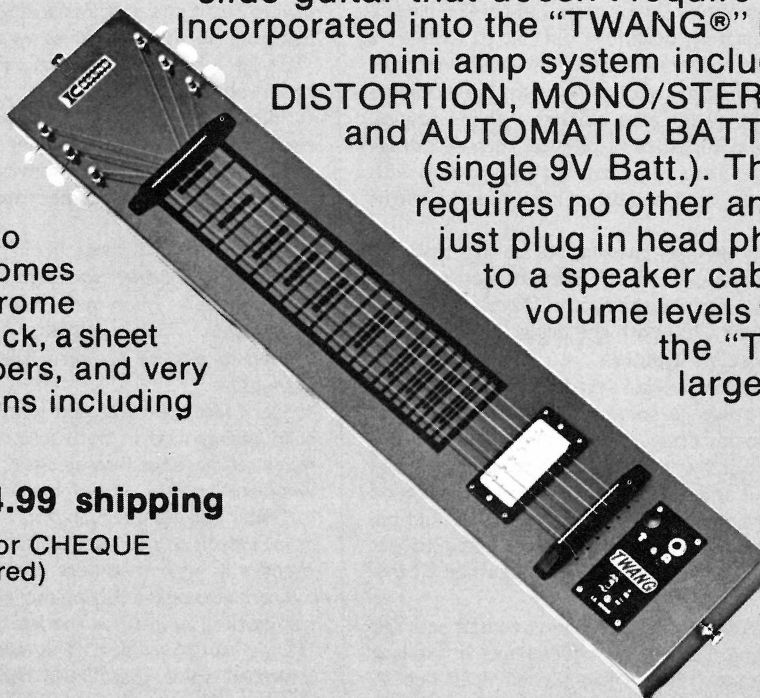
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